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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000204

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/12/2029  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: REFERENDUM CAMPAIGNS WRAP-UP, WITH "YES" LEADING  
IN THE POLLS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: As the February 13 deadline for campaigning approaches, both the YES and the No camps are wrapping up their activities. The GBRV refused to approve student activists' request to hold a final march in central Caracas on February 12 while Chavez announced his own "Yes" march for the following day. Both the "Yes" and "No" camps are now running extensive ad campaigns in independent media outlets; the "Yes" camp continues to monopolize state media. Pollsters report that the "Yes" has pulled ahead of the "No" by as much as 6 percent, although one pundit told poloffs that those being polled may be falsely responding due to perceived pressure from Chavez -- enough so that the "No" camp may still have a small, but shrinking, chance. End Summary.

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CAMPAIGNS WRAP UP  
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12. (C) The Ministry of Justice announced February 11 that it would not approve student activists' request to hold a final "No" march between the impoverished slums of Catia and Petare -- on the western and eastern edges of Caracas -- on February 13, the final day of the referendum campaign. The previous night, Chavez announced that the "Yes" campaign would conduct its final official march from Petare to downtown Caracas on February 12. Television coverage of the mass rally suggest that there were tens of thousands of participants. An official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told poloff February 12 that the entire government was attending the rally.

13. (SBU) Student activists gathered in the affluent Chacaito neighborhood the afternoon of February 12 as part of the wrap-up of the "No" campaign. Student leader Juan Andres Mejias from Simon Bolivar University announced that due to the lack of time, the university activists had accepted the MOJ's decision and opted for the stationary rally instead of the planned march. The National Electoral Council (CNE) announced a nationwide suspension of liquor sales starting 2 p.m. on February 13 -- 40 hours before elections -- to be lifted 2 p.m. on February 16.

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CHAVEZ KEEPS UP THE PRESSURE  
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14. (SBU) Chavez announced February 11 that he had

discovered a US-backed plot involving active duty military who infiltrated Miraflores Palace and are sending messages to military units located in opposition-governed states. The Venezuelan President denounced the so-called "Operation Independence" on Venezolana de Television's evening broadcast of "Counterpunch." In his weekly "Lines of Chavez" column published February 12, Chavez contended that February 15 would be a "date with the future" and he urged his supporters that "if you don't fail me, I won't fail you."

15. (SBU) Representatives from the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) union publicly complained that employees at state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and the tax authority (SENIAT) had been told to use their cell phones to take a picture of their ballot print-out on February 15. Those who could not prove their "Yes" vote would risk losing their government job. CTV complained in January that PDVSA employees had been pressured to donate money to the "Yes" campaign, with the threat of being fired. The CNE reportedly has prohibited cellular phone use in polling stations in response to opposition party demands, although it is unclear how well this rule will be enforced.

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POLLSTER: "YES" AHEAD, BUT "NO" STILL IN THE RUNNING  
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16. (C) Pollster John Magdaleno told pollsters February 12 that his analysis of recent polling from a variety of sources indicates that the "Yes" has a small statistical advantage, but that victory is by no means guaranteed. He claimed that the most recent results that had just come in from Datanalisis and Seijas showed the "Yes" leading by 6 percent. Magdaleno nevertheless assessed that there could be a significant number of those polled who gave false "Yes"

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responses, owing in part to the growing pressure being exerted by the GBRV on public employees and social program beneficiaries. He proposed that if 6 percent of "Yes" respondents either abstained from voting or cast a "No" ballot, the amendment would fail. By looking at the scenario with respondents who said they would "probably" vote, the "No" would win. Conversely, those who said they would "definitely" go to the polls gave the "Yes" a solid advantage.

17. (C) Given how close the numbers are, Magdaleno surmised that the final results on February 15 would likely come down to the relative abstention rates between the "Yes" and "No" camps and would probably be decided by some 3 percent of the eligible voting electorate -- between 200,000 and 600,000 voters. He warned that given the likelihood of a close vote, the CNE may wait until nearly all of the votes are counted before declaring a winner. Magdaleno cautioned that a delay in announcing the results would exacerbate political tensions and lead to some street protests and scattered violence.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) Magdaleno's skepticism of reliable respondent answers indicate how unpredictable Venezuelan voting and abstention patterns are for this election. Several pollsters have told us that it is very difficult to anticipate who will go to the polls, particularly among the much-coveted independent "ni-ni" group, which is about a third of the Venezuelan electorate. Nevertheless, they all agree that the "Yes" camp appears to have the advantage going into the February 15 referendum. After a brief but tense electoral campaign marred by pro-government political violence, any CNE delay in releasing results is likely to exacerbate political tensions, which in turn could drive Venezuelans into the streets, and potentially to violence. End Comment.

CAULFIELD